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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COPPER COUNTRY

Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail

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Historical Timeline

- 8-5-2025 Millage for \$32 million for a new jail/sheriff's office does not pass 44% yes, **54% no**.
- 11-2025 Three Houghton County Jail committees (and one subcommittee) have been active since November 2025 (agenda, minutes at *houghtoncounty.net*). Overall goal: ***Develop a jail/sheriff's office plan that the public can support.*** Focus is on what the public is saying about why they did not support the 2025 millage and addressing those issues.
- 4-14-2026 Deadline for three jail-related committees' reports to the Board of Commissioners: to be delivered at the meeting of the Houghton County monthly board meeting that day

Status report 4-12-2026

There have been several jail-related discussions since the 3/25/26 press release:

- 4/2/2026 Jail Needs Subcommittee meeting, 11am
- 4/6/2026 County Board Work Session, 10am
- 4/6/2026 Jail Committee meeting, 4pm

The April 2, 2026 meeting of the Jail Needs Subcommittee included the following discussions/advances.

1. Report of the Needs Subcommittee—Preparation of the upcoming report was the main topic of the meeting. Sheriff Saaranen reported on a meeting he had with Commissioners Tikkanen and Britz and Jail Committee chair Jared Hyrkas. They discussed that no additional renderings of the jail plan were needed and that a major issue is, as always, the high cost of the jail plan according to Abonmarche/Byce (AB). Hyrkas is making some phone calls to see what local contractors think about the costs. Committee members chimed in with ideas about how cost savings might be identified. Mike Hamilton suggested a partial build—put up the outside of the building but leave something inside un-done until the funds are available. There was recognition that building jails is a specialized kind of building; the Delta County Jail, however, was built by local contractors and we have very talented and experienced local firms so it is readily expected that they could build our jail. Faith Morrison reminded the group of two things missing from the AB rendering: small courtroom, and juvenile holding (a third space for handling those in mental health crisis,

came up in another discussion). Justin LaCosse introduced the idea of a RFI (request for information) or an “Industry Day”. There was support for having this type of event.

2. Scenario videos on needs of the jail. Valorie Troesch has found a volunteer to help make the videos of the scenarios created by Jail Captain Travis Dessellier; updates will come.
3. Subcommittee Report preparation. Faith Morrison volunteered to write a first draft of the Jail Needs Subcommittees report and to get input from the members before submitting the report to the Jail Committee.
4. New Scenario. Travis Dessellier noted he has created a 5th scenario about the impact of flooding in the jail (attached). This was discussed.
5. Space for Emergency Manager. There was discussion of where the county’s Emergency Manager’s space should be placed once there is a new jail. Should it be with the jail or with the courthouse?
6. Meetings. No future meeting of the subcommittee was scheduled, but there could be future meetings depending on the desires of the Jail Committee.

Post-meeting update: Morrison completed a draft of the *Jail Needs Subcommittee report* which was circulated by email among the committee members and then delivered to the Jail Committee on April 7, 2026 just before 1pm.

At the County Board’s April work session on April 2, 2026 a Jail Committee Update appeared on the agenda. All five commissioners were in attendance. Board Chair Tom Tikkanen said that reports from the three committees are coming at the Tuesday April 14 Board meeting.

Vice Chair Roy Britz (also chair of the Sharon Avenue and Jail re-Use Committee) reported on actions taken on the reuse of the Sharon Avenue property. The plan is to use the sanctuary portion as county storage eliminating about \$11,000 in storage expenses. The newer side of the building, referred to as the gathering space, is being discussed to be renovated to office space for as-yet unspecified county offices. OHM Hancock has been awarded the bid to do this redesign, and they are working with the County Building Department and have started their work. There will be a reporting Tuesday. The committee has not considered in depth the re-use of the current jail although using it for storage is a possibility.

The commissioners followed up on issues considered by the County Held Properties Committee, chaired by Commissioner Joel Keranen. Commissioner Anderson asked on the status of the appraisal of Canal View. Chair Tikkanen said he had no updates on that. Keranen indicated that other than that appraisal, his committee is ready to report.

Tikkanen reported for the Jail Committee that they are to meet later in the afternoon to discuss finalizing their report. Anderson asked Faith Morrison and Sheriff Saaranen, also members of the Jail Committee and present, if the Jail Committee will be recommending a jail size (number of beds). Morrison indicated that the Jail Committee is focused on reducing costs and are not taking a position on the number of beds at this time. They are concentrating on the sizes of the working spaces.

Public Comments: During public comments at this meeting Faith Morrison informed the Board that the Jail Needs Subcommittee, working with Senator Slotkin’s office, had submitted a request for federal

funding for early engineering costs for the jail project. This is in addition to a similar request sent by the subcommittee to Representative Bergman's office. More details are in a previous press release.

The April 6, 2026 meeting of the Jail Committee included the following discussions/advances.

Public Comments. The committee heard comments from members of the public at both public comment sessions. These comments encouraged the committee to consider "out of the box" ideas on how to address the jail problem at lower costs. The committee thanked these individuals for their engagement and comments.

Jail Needs Subcommittee report. Faith Morrison gave a summary of the Jail Needs Subcommittee's report, which was in the process of being prepared. Note: the subcommittee report was finalized and delivered on April 7, 2026.

Preparing the Jail Committee report. This was discussed. Note that participants at this meeting on MS Teams could hear the discussion, but it was later determined that they could not be heard by the in-person attendees. Thus, unfortunately, some key input was lost from at least one committee member and perhaps from some members of the public.

The discussion centered on whether the committee wanted to recommend going forward without some key engineering information (square footages for the design; specifics for the spaces) or recommend holding off until these aspects of the design could be formalized. There was a vigorous discussion. The Jail Needs Subcommittee had created a first pass of some square footages, but additional work is needed to get specific about what is proposed to be built and how much it may cost. The committee is focused on reducing the cost of the millage needed to build a new jail.

The committee discussed various ways to go about a build. A number of committee members have experience as builders/planners/engineers and contributed to the discussion. They discussed the RFI (request for information) and RFQ (request for qualifications) ideas that had come up at the subcommittee discussions. They passed around ideas of how big projects are designed and built (bid with exception, cost plus incentive, design-bid-build, etc.). It was a lively discussion.

Timing of the millage. The timing discussion is linked to the design discussion: if it is determined to be acceptable to go forward without further engineering plans, then a November millage is fine. If not, then the millage would need to be delayed. There was concern about losing momentum if there is a delay.

The committee discussed that leaving things less defined for the millage would be asking the county's voters to leave a great deal up to the Board. Will they give that trust to the Board? It was suggested that the Board could pass some resolutions to indicate what decisions it is committing to. Note: more of this discussion is reflected in the committee's report which will be presented to the Board on Tuesday April 14.

Finalizing the report of the Jail Committee will be done over email. Faith Morrison will get a first draft out and the committee members agreed to some tight timelines for giving input. The final report will be delivered to the County Administrator on Friday April 10 (this indeed happened).

Summary: Significant steps in the jail project have taken place. Three reports will be heard by the board on Tuesday, April 14 at the County Board Meeting. At least written reports have been created, the Jail Needs Subcommittee's report and the Jail Committee's report.

Upcoming meetings:

(Open to the public; locations and credentials for online participation posted on the County's website houghtoncounty.net)

- 4/14/2026 County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3rd floor) –**Reports due from all three jail-related committees. A key topic of discussion is the timing of the millage.**
- 5/4/2026 County Board Work Session, 10am (5th floor)
- 5/7/2026 Jail Committee meeting, 4pm, (5th floor)
- 5/12/2026 County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3rd floor)

Attachments

Fifth Jail Scenario from Jail Captain Travis Dessellier.

Basement Flood

With the spring weather that moved into Houghton County in June, large amounts run off from the snow and continued rainfall has caused the mains to plug on the streets. As a result, Corrections Staff noticed a very distinct smell in the booking area. Corrections staff went into the basement of Houghton County Sheriff's Office to see water bubbling and rising out of the drains located on the basement floor. It was rising at a quick rate, putting one inch of water on the floor within a half hour. Several drains are located in the basement on the floor which will affect the emergency manager's hallway/office, evidence rooms, record storage, locker rooms, multipurpose interview room, medical office, and next to the field services workstation room.

While the water continues to rise in the basement, staff attempts to make contact with Always Available Sewer and Septic to assist with the issues. Vacuums and pumps are hooked up to help combat the rising water level as Houghton DPW continues to work on getting the main drains unclogged. With the rising water levels continuing and pumps not keeping up staff attempts to locate any items that could be damaged. The evidence room is opened to see the same amount of water located on the floor and many vital items damaged because of the water. Records storage room had boxes upon boxes that are damaged. Communication equipment (radios, pagers, computer equipment, etc...) are damaged located in the emergency manager's office. The list goes on off damaged items from carpeting to wirings.

After several hours of work done by staff and outside sources the drains broke free and were able to function properly.

The evidence room contains vital items, which if damaged or destroyed cannot be duplicated. With our current set up there is multiple items located on the floor due to limited space. Evidence should be stored securely, typically in locked rooms or lockers, with specialized protection, such as freezers for biological evidence, or secured safes for money and jewelry. Facilities should feature, secured cabinets, 24/7 surveillance cameras, and alarm systems in their evidence rooms/area.

Records storage is packed full with many boxes located on the floor due to limited space. As a result, important records and documents were damaged or destroyed because of the basement flooding.

Overall because of this flood items were damaged, destroyed, and cannot be recovered. An increase in the general space and size of the basement would be the best way for improvement to deter this issue. Rearranging is a possibility, but this would be a short-term fix as records and evidence continue to build.